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Obituary: Haim Schwarzbaum

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Obituary: Haim Schwarzbaum

Abstract

With the passing of Haim Schwarzbaum on November 11, 1983, the international folklore community lost one of its most erudite members. In light of his long list of publications (Ganuz 1984) and his active participation in international meetings, it would surprise many that Haim Schwarzbaum never completed his formal university education or held an academic position. He researched and wrote his numerous studies at the end of his workday at a government office, lacking the convenience of a university library and of student assistance. For him folklore scholarship was a labor of love.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

in drama and performance studies, in folklore and folklife scholarship, and in literary criticism.

The projections and productions of that generous interdisciplinary intellect will live on in the presence of his words, but the person is gone and there is a stillness and sadness at the heart of things. I and countless others who knew and loved him miss him sorely. I first encountered Vic in print in 1969 and his analyses of symbolism and ritual were an important factor in my decision, despite conservative advice to the contrary, to supplement my graduate program in comparative literature with work in cultural anthropology. A year later I was part of the throng at his seminar on Symbol, Myth, and Ritual—an experience not unlike an alchemical fire that changes many of us utterly and emboldened me, then and now, to dance on the interstices and play with mirrors. For those of us who “work” on play and cultural subjunctivities in all their polysemy and multivocality, he was indeed *magister ludi* and betwixt and between all the “serious” scholar’s words, you can feel the laughing spirit, glimpse the inimitable samba, and hear that Glaswegian voice telling stories, singing songs, and raising a toast to life.

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BARBARA A. BABCOCK

Haim Schwarzbaum (1911–1983)

With the passing of Haim Schwarzbaum on November 11, 1983, the international folklore community lost one of its most erudite members. In light of his long list of publications (Ganuz 1984) and his active participation in international meetings, it would surprise many that Haim Schwarzbaum never completed his formal university education or held an academic position. He researched and wrote his numerous studies at the end of his workday at a government office, lacking the convenience of a university library and of student assistance. For him folklore scholarship was a labor of love.

Haim Schwarzbaum was born in Warsaw, Poland, on September 24, 1911, and grew up in a Hasidic East-European Jewish family. His early education was in traditional Jewish schools that focused upon religious texts and Hasidic narratives. At the age of 17 he shifted to a more secular education and enrolled in the Hebrew Teachers’ College at Warsaw, from which he graduated in 1931. The break with traditional education brought with it an exposure to and a fascination with European languages and literatures, first Polish and later English. However, when Schwarzbaum began his studies at the University of Warsaw he turned his attention to Arabic language and literature, hoping thereby to gain a deeper understanding of medieval Jewish poetry that flourished in Islamic Spain. Soon he found himself studying Arabic language, literature, and eventually folklore for their own sake. When he moved to Erez-Israel in April, 1937, he continued his studies at the Hebrew University, majoring in Oriental studies. At the height of the Arab Revolt in 1938 he had to stop his regular studies, and joined the Jewish Settlement Police. During his service he had the opportunity to come in even closer contact with Palestinian Arabs and to explore their folklore directly, searching in particular for Islamic traditions about biblical figures. In 1940 Schwarzbaum began his civil service career, working first in the censorship office of the British government, and later, in 1945, moving to

the census section. After a few years, in 1950, he moved to the Ministry of Defense where he worked as an archivist until his retirement in 1977.

During all of those years Schwarzbaum devoted himself to folklore, working long hours into the night as a lonely scholar for whom learning was its own reward. In his studies Schwarzbaum achieved a phenomenal erudition in comparative folklore. His command of folklore bibliography was unequalled, and his books brim with references and information that make them valuable far beyond their specific topics, so much so that they became standard references in folklore.

His three books in English represent Schwarzbaum's main scholarly interests, though his articles and reviews in Hebrew and English demonstrate an even greater breadth and depth of scholarship. His first volume, *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (1968) has become a major bibliographical resource for the study of Jewish traditional narratives and an important supplement to *The Types of the Folktale* (Aarne and Thompson 1961). As the basis for his study Schwarzbaum chose a collection of Yiddish folktales, *Maaselech un Mesholim: Tales and Parables*, edited by Naftoli Gross (1955). He provided extensive annotation for each of these tales. Often these notes amount to minor essays that comparatively trace the history of the tale in Jewish and general tradition. It is evident that Schwarzbaum's scholarship is in the tradition of the great comparative annotators in folklore like Francis James Child, Johannes Bolte and Georg Polivka, Archer Taylor and Stith Thompson, René Basset, Victor Chauvin and Paul Delarue, who laid the foundation for modern folklore research. In that sense he belongs in this group of eminent scholars.

The second English volume, *Mishle Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berachiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore* (1979) follows the same pattern. Schwarzbaum selected a medieval Hebrew fable collection (Hadas 1967) that contains 113 texts as the basis for his comparative annotation of fable scholarship. Together with its comprehensive introduction, the volume has become indispensable to fable studies. The notes explore fully the medieval fable tradition, extending the bibliographical coverage from the ancient cultures of the Near East, Central Asia, and India to modern fable scholarship and theories. Many of these notes amount to brief studies in the history of a particular fable and its geographical distribution. This volume supplements Ben Edwin Perry's *Aesopica* (1952), extending comparative research to the oral traditions in numerous languages.

Schwarzbaum's last book, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk-Literature* (1982), brings his scholarship full circle to its very beginning. His first publication was an essay on "Job in Islamic Folklore," that appeared in the Hebrew daily *Ha-Boker* (February 18, 1938). The Islamic rendition of biblical narratives and the Arabic image of biblical figures continuously attracted his intellectual curiosity. Several of the essays in his Hebrew book, *The Folkloristic Aspects of Judaism and Islam* (1975), deal with this topic directly. Schwarzbaum also planned and began to work on an ambitious project, which remains unfinished: an encyclopaedia of biblical figures in Islamic tradition. His studies on Islamic folklore established his reputation in Oriental studies, and even contributed to the dialogue between Arabs and Jews in Israel. Several chapters of his Hebrew book were translated into Arabic and were well received by scholars and laymen alike. Indirectly, he made his scholarship a vehicle for peace.

As a comparative folklorist who worked outside of academic establishments, Schwarzbaum had an urgent need for international scholarly contacts. Consequently, he was an avid correspondent, writing letters with equal attention to both the novice and the seasoned scholar. He had the ability to make beginning students feel that they were making a major contribution to scholarship. He had a contagious enthusiasm for folklore scholarship and at every meeting he sought out conversations about broad research subjects. It was clear that he missed the

academic framework of seminars and discussions in which he could have flourished, but by not having students of his own, he made all of us his students.

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